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**Title:** UNPACKING COMMODIFICATION THROUGH THE ENCOUNTER

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**Abstract:**

Debates complicating universal constructions of tourist commodification are far from new. Yet, within tourist studies distinctions continue to resurface that reify boundaries positioning processes of commodification as necessarily liberating, victimising *or* pathologising. Through these boundary making processes there is potential that the meanings, politics and memories of individuals, invested in experiences deemed ‘commodified’, become devalued as tourist scholars praise pre-commodified experience. This paper responds to these tensions through utilising a feminist embodied framework focused on the encounter. The paper troubles innate constructions of commodification, by showing how interpretation of commodification is spatially and socially specific to the moment of encounter. It is thus argued that analysis of the encounter offers a way to negotiate sponsorship requirements during event planning.

**Key words:** commodification, Pride, Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, sexuality, festival, encounter

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A few nostalgic radicals claim it [Mardi Gras] is no longer political, that it has become a captive of the commercialisation and respectability of gay life. But the very fact these accusations can be made suggests how far things have changed. For many people growing up in isolated communities, or in families where discussion of sex and gender is confined to existing narrow norms, Mardi Gras remains an important moment.  
(Altman, 2014)

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras festival (herein, Mardi Gras) is Australia's largest queer Pride event, attracting hundreds of thousands of national and international tourists to Sydney each year. Mardi Gras Parade, the pinnacle event of the festival, is an elaborate spectacle of 10,000 people marching alongside over 100 humorous and satirical floats. The origins of Mardi Gras are conventionally narrated at the intersection of two key events; recognition to Stonewall Day; and, as a solidarity march with the San Francisco Freedom Day Committee who were protesting a homophobic bill, California Proposition 6 (which enabled the firing of any Californian teacher who was found to be "advocating, imposing, encouraging or promoting" homosexual activity (Ryan & Hall, 2001, p.111)). The first Mardi Gras is said to have met conflict when police revoked the parade permit. Defiant in their agenda, demonstrators marched on to Kings Cross. Fifty-three demonstrators were arrested. Many were allegedly bashed. Responding to police brutality, on June 26<sup>th</sup> 1978 hundreds protested outside Liverpool Street Court. Seven more demonstrators were arrested, provoking wider outrage. On July 15<sup>th</sup> of that year as many as 2,000 activists marched through inner Sydney, demanding the New South Wales Labour government drop charges. In response, police arrested eleven more.

This was the largest gay and lesbian rally Australia had yet seen, and generated national outrage, with support rallies subsequently taking place in Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane (Ryan & Hall, 2001). On June 30<sup>th</sup> the following year a morning march and evening parade commemorated both the 1<sup>st</sup> Mardi Gras anniversary and the 10<sup>th</sup> New York Stonewall riots anniversary, attracting several thousand.

Today, Mardi Gras is conceived by many as a form of street theatre and satire, eager to comment on, yet not necessarily threaten, the politics of the day. These early themes continue to position the event as uniquely Australian, yet also inextricably linked to the gay Pride marches of the Global North (Markwell, 2002). Some go so far as to claim the parade as *the* most popular gay and lesbian event in the world (Carbery, 1995; Johnston, 2005). Yet, the above epigraph from Australian academic and leading gay rights activist Dennis Altman points to the social contestations that emerge through the festival's particular mix of sexual politics, public visibility, homonormativity, commodification and hedonism. While Mardi Gras is presented, consumed and conceived in multiple and complex ways (Johnston & Waitt, 2015), discourses surrounding Mardi Gras at the national scale are often univocal

and universal, and thus do not always align with the multiplicities and complexities of personal narratives. Taking impetus from this disconnection, this paper is specifically concerned with the ways Mardi Gras has become intimately entwined with commodification – building on previous scholarship by unpacking the politics of Mardi Gras’ commodification from the perspective of attendees.

Commodification is conceived to have taken such a hold on Mardi Gras as to render the event unrecognisable to its ‘pre-commodified’ form – a process thought to threaten the politics and meanings emergent through this event (Waitt & Markwell, 2006). Much scholarship engages with the processes of commodification at Mardi Gras (Kates, 2003; Markwell, 2002; Waitt & Markwell, 2006). This work has been pivotal in detailing the event’s evolution from a radical street protest to a commercialised, internationally branded event – asking many questions concerning the political potency of such a hedonistic, homonormative and commodified Pride festival, and granting insights into the tensions that arise from competing stakeholders as a result of increasing commodification. Markwell’s (2002) work, for example, serves as crucial in understanding the ways organisers of Mardi Gras negotiate the increasing economic significance, alongside that of social, cultural and political importance. Markwell grants specific attention to the tensions arising through the competing demands placed on Mardi Gras by the needs and desires of attendees and the tourism industry. This work recognises that while Mardi Gras and its associated tourism is a requirement in positioning Sydney as a gay and lesbian capital, there are ongoing discrepancies between the high levels of public visibility internationally sought by organisers and tourism operators, and the limited political commitment to domestic legal reform sought by gay and lesbian attendees. Along similar lines, Kates (2003) has examined tensions emergent between the ‘gay collectivity’ and the ‘heterosexual mainstream’ (a typology including large corporations) as a result of Mardi Gras’ increasing commodification. In interpreting Mardi Gras’ future, Kates (2003, p.18) predicted that:

The darker possibility is that economic factors and meanings involved in Mardi Gras’ production may come to dominate and effectively constitute the festival, appropriating and reinsignifying seemingly progressive and even deviant images to promote capitalist aims.

Influenced by the work of Bell and Binnie (2000) I suggest, that while invaluable, previous scholarship concerned with Mardi Gras’ commodification has largely focused on a critique of the broad shift from social to commercial goals of governance (and the accompanying neglect of social needs and cultural aims). This focus, I suggest, inhibits sustained and critical analysis into the nuanced and complex processes of commodification that unfold through this event, and how this is experienced by attendees invested in the event’s various iterations. In examining academic discourses circulating the ‘pink economy’, Bell and Binnie (2000) note the ways certain scholars condemn queer consumption practices through normative moralistic frameworks (Field, 1995; Smith, 1997), while conversely, other critics have argued the rights of non-normative sexualities might be secured through

capitalism (Evans, 1993; Gould, 1998). Bell and Binnie's work suggests both frameworks to be equally problematic – the latter's through its exclusion of those not in a position to purchase liberation, the former for not comprehending the potential political dimensions of consumer space. Alert to the tensions at play between the opposing discourses, Bell and Binnie (2000) call for a more nuanced discussion, which avoids over simplified characterisations of capitalism as liberating, victimising or pathologising.

Seeking to build on this work, yet turning specific attention to the commodification of Pride as experienced by attendees, I suggest commodification at Mardi Gras occurs in context specific ways, across multiple sites, by numerous groups – yet such nuances are often overlooked in constructing processes of commodification as uniform (cf, Kates, 2003; Rushbrook, 2005). I attempt to illustrate that in attending to the moment of encounter, we can begin to unpack the complexities through examination of the nuanced ways attendees make sense of this event. Granting attention to the moment of encounter draws on feminist approaches to tourist scholarship that acknowledges the possibilities of embodied accounts for understanding the ways individuals experience place whilst travelling (Johnston, 2001), as well as the importance of place and space in understanding the constructions, performances and politics of Pride (Johnston & Waitt, 2015). Empirically I draw on the experiences of one participant as they encounter various iterations of the commodification of Pride during Mardi Gras. In-depth attention to the encountered experiences of one participant attempts to move away from universal, simplified characterisations of commodification – enabling commodification to be reconceived within this context as potentially liberating, victimising *and* pathologising.

To assist conceptualisation I first introduce the embodied theoretical framework. Positioning this work within feminist approaches to tourist studies, which draw on theories of embodiment, I detail Ahmed's (2004) analogy of 'affective economies' and 'likeness' and 'unlikeness' as a way to unpack the moment of encounter. I next move to a discussion of method, suggesting intensive focus on the narratives of one participant as a framework to move away from universalised understandings of Pride's commodification and make sense of the multiple ways the commodification of Pride is encountered. Turning to a discussion of the empirical, I present three renderings of commodification - corporate, organisational and governmental - examining how they are differently encountered. In so doing, I illustrate the complexities of the commodification of Pride, and the ways the effects of commodification are intimately entangled with the politics of this event, space and the individual's situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988). The paper ends with a broader discussion concerning the importance for tourist studies in attending to the encounter and embodiment as a way to complicate essentialised framings of commodification.

Yet, before launching into a discussion of the theoretical approach it is first helpful to detail exactly what I mean in utilising the terms ‘commodity’, ‘commodification’ and ‘commercialism’. I borrow from Castree (2004) in broadly conceiving a ‘commodity’ as something that can be sold or exchanged, while I conceive commodification, and processes of commodification, as the ways through which a previously non-saleable thing (material or non-material), comes to be (re)evaluated economically. Commercialism, in turn, here refers to a process through which emphasis is placed on maximising economic profit. While presenting definitions for comprehension, I do not seek to essentialise these terms and understand their use cannot be reduced to these stated definitions.

## 2. AN EMBODIED THEORETICAL APPROACH TO COMMODIFICATION

Considerations of the body and subjectivity (a term discussed in greater detail below) have been slow to emerge within tourist studies despite being incorporated more readily across the social sciences from the mid-1980s. Feminist scholars Veijola and Jokinen (1994) were ahead of their time in challenging the forgotten body within the discipline. Recognising Western hierarchical dualisms, and the reproduction of hegemonic, disembodied, masculinist knowledge, they proposed the incorporation of ‘embodiment, radical Otherness, multiplicity of differences, sex and sexuality in tourism’ (Veijola & Jokinen, 1994, p.129). Yet, it took almost a decade for their call to be answered. Johnston’s (2001) seminal response in the article *(Other) Bodies and Tourism Studies* was crucial in empirically illustrating the possibilities of an embodied tourist account through an exploration of two mega Pride events: the Aotearoa/New Zealand HERO Parade and Mardi Gras Parade. Working through a feminist framework, Johnston examined the processual ways embodied subjectivities evolve spatially and temporally. Crouch and Desforges (2003) also explored relations between tourism, the body, subjectivity and space, accounting for the politics and power of tourism. Their work sought to rectify not only the forgotten body, but more importantly, the isolation of politics, power and subjectivity within studies of tourism through examining the metaphors of the encounter (Crouch, 1999), performance (Edensor, 2001), and dwelling (Ingold, 2000). In this paper I draw specifically on the notion of the encounter, as one way to explore the politics, power and subjectivity bound up with Pride’s commodification. The encounter offers unique insights into the moment where the social, biological, psychological and space intersect. Attending to the ways individuals’ encounter various forms of Pride’s commodification during Mardi Gras thus grants insights into the complex ways commodification is understood differently by attendees.

Subjectivity refers to the ways knowledge and understanding are shaped through an individuals’ experiences and social position (sexuality, gender and nationality, for example), in contrast to understanding knowledge as objective, external and universal. Subjectivity is not decentred from social structures but rather bound up with broader knowledge, powers and discourses. At the same time, however, the body holds the potential to act in resistance to dominant powers through

performances and discourses that transgress the normative and universal (Sharp, 2009). Attending to subjectivity thus holds potential to understand the ways individuals both trouble and reconfirm dominant social views conceived as objective, external and universal – such as understandings that commodification has threatened the meanings and politics of Mardi Gras.

Haraway's (1988) seminal notion of situated knowledge is intimately aligned with understandings of subjectivity; situated knowledge referring to locatable epistemic positions, which are partial, embodied and localised. The concept of situated knowledge emerged through the 1980s and early 1990s as feminist theorists questioned understandings of power and ways of knowing (Kobayashi, 2009). Focus was on who (or which subjectivities – male, white, middle class, for example) possessed access to power, how 'situation' affects knowledge productions and the ways through which knowledge is valued differently, depending on one's social location. Recognising that there is no possibility of universalised, external knowledge, but rather that knowledge is always produced from within a particular social and spatial position, focus here is on the location through which knowledge emerges, and the questioning of unlocatable knowledge claims. The concepts of subjectivity and situated knowledge, therefore, offer a framework to bring into question broad understandings of Pride's commodification – where the encounter offers insight to the moment where meanings are negotiated, resisted and mediated in multiple, spatially and subject specific ways.

To assist in dissecting the encounter, I draw on Ahmed's (2004) analogy of 'affective economies' and notion of 'likeness' and 'unlikeness'. First, Ahmed's (2004, p.120) analogy of affective economies is useful in conceptualising the ways emotions work in much the same way as economic capital, emotion 'does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation'. That is, rather than understanding emotions as personal and distinct psychological dispositions, we need to understand how emotions are culturally constructed and become meaningful through a mediated relationship between the social and personal, and thus between the collective and the individual. Emotions, following Ahmed, work by attaching themselves to certain human and non-human bodies, through this attachment particular bodies experiencing shared attachment become stuck together. In consequence a binding is formed between those bodies. Through this binding, boundaries are created that identify what is, and what is not, connected to that emotion. Boundaries become intensified the more this process circulates through discourse and performance. Certain individuals, possessing particular subjectivities and situated knowledge similarly aligning, likewise become bound up in an affective economy.

In examining the affective economy of queer Pride, by way of example, I suggest Pride does not reside in any given subject or object. That is, Pride is not innate; it is culturally produced through the circulation of particular social, material and psychic bodies. Through circulation, Pride becomes stuck to certain human and non-human bodies, such as some queer identifying individuals and certain

materialities (such as the rainbow flag). Pride has undergone a process of intensification through increasing circulation, which has served to shape particular boundaries and surfaces regarding how Pride is understood. Overtime, considerations of what is, and what is not, Pride have thus become more distinguished. In consequence, the accumulation of meanings associated with objects, such as the rainbow flag, evoke certain affective politics during particular encounters for particular individuals. For example, encounters where the use of the rainbow flag is identified as not aligning with its normative associations, may be read as out of place, generating particular negative responses for those invested in particular ideas.

It is here that Ahmed's notion of 'likeness' and 'unlikeness' comes into play. If an encounter with Pride is identified as aligning within the construction of what Pride is (to that individual) then it is read as a likeness. Likeness, thus, works to align a subject with another – building stronger boundaries between what is, and what is not, Pride. At the same time, objects, symbols and human bodies that are read as not aligning become dis-identified, producing the character of the hated as 'unlikeness' – which work to threaten the boundaries of what Pride is, and what it is not. On this view, the commodification of Pride is not inherently hated, or necessarily perceived as either 'like' or 'unlike' that which is queer Pride. Rather, the ways in which commodification of Pride is read are dependent on the socially and spatially specific moments of encounter. This framework is thus useful in moving beyond essentialised constructions of commodification, to rather unpack the complexities and nuances concerning the commodification of Pride.

### 3. METHOD

I follow Bissell (2014), and Waitt and Macquarie (2014), in granting in-depth insights into the narratives of one participant, David. To be sure, attention to one participant's experience omits any possibility of suggesting a uniformity of experience. Yet, this is the very reason why intense focus on one participant is of interest: exploring encounters grants intimate insights into the multiple and context specific ways Pride is commodified and encountered at Mardi Gras – such insights cannot be reduced to either broader cultural structures, normative valuing systems or individual agency alone, but rather tells us things about how commodification is encountered in complex ways by those invested in alternative sets of ideas around this event. Attention to one participant aims to generate a space for them to 'speak', rather than making normative judgements around commodification (Castree, 2004).

David was one of twenty four participants who took part in a research project examining mobilities to the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Participation involved a mixed methodology, including semi-structured interviews (both before and after travel to Mardi Gras), online storytelling and the creation of a solicited diary during the return journey, which included photos and writing. David's



narrative serves as the particular focus of this paper because his investment in queer activism, alongside his subjectivities and situated knowledge render particularly telling encounters of the complex ways commodification is encountered by someone entangled with particular sets of ideas around Mardi Gras, as well as sexual politics more broadly.

Further to this, David became intimately invested in the research process, guiding the research in his own way. This ultimately affected the way I came to document and analyse his experiences very differently to those of the other participants. David, for example, interpreted the open diary instructions differently to other participants, providing limited detail of the journey undertaken to Mardi Gras (which remained the focus of the other 23 participants), choosing rather to narrate his embodied encounters while walking around Sydney once arriving – rendering insights into how the commodified materialities of Mardi Gras and Pride were experienced and enacted through varying embodied performances. David's diary was particularly extensive, comprising 11 entries and 60 images. David was also the only participant who travelled alone; which seemingly afforded opportunity to reflect and create diary entries during travel, rather than on the road or once returning home, as was the case with the remaining participants. Intensive attention to one participant's intimate and personal encounters seeks to extend the more commonly told scholarly commodification narrative concerned with the production and selling of Mardi Gras.

Presenting David's subjectivity and experiences in such depth, does however raise concerns regarding anonymity. For David, sharing his experiences in this way was viewed as a political process that offered opportunity for public visibility. It is for this reason David consented to the in-depth retelling of his experiences and illustrates why he chose not to use a pseudonym for publication.

#### 4. DAVID

Mardi Gras is a milestone in the development of my identity

Of me as a whole person

It complements my past work and journeys

Marriage equality, working in politics and campaigning

Coming out to my Dad

(Ethno-poem collated by Gorman-Murray et al. (2014a) from David's interview transcripts)

Attendees are not empty vessels – mindlessly consuming the commodification of Pride. As is evident through the above ethno-poem, attendees such as David, arrive with their own sets of subjectivities and situated knowledge, all of which affect perceptions regarding the different ways Pride is commodified at Mardi Gras. In presenting David's subjectivities and situated knowledge I seek to illustrate how he is an example of one individual, who is in a unique position to decode the nuances and complexities of commodification. In so doing, rather than aiming to draw any broad conclusions

regarding the ways attendees encounter the commodification of Pride, through in-depth analysis of David's encounters I attempt to make a case for attending to embodied encounters as a way to unpack the multiple, context specific ways Pride is commodified by different groups, across different spaces and to different affects during Mardi Gras.

David lives in Wellington, New Zealand - is New Zealand born and of Chinese-Vietnamese descent. At the time of the project David held a tertiary degree, was in his thirties, and identified as queer and single. David talked of the difficulty in negotiating his queer identity alongside his traditional Chinese-Vietnamese middle class upbringing – particularly evident through relations with his Chinese father. In the process of publicly identifying as queer, David found it easier to discuss his sexuality through politics, rather than with his family. For this reason, David became heavily active in queer activism while at university, serving as president of the University Students' Association. Following university he went on to become the co-chair of Rainbow Labour (a segment of the New Zealand Labour Party advancing issues relating to non-normative sexualities); a position that enabled active participation in the legalisation of New Zealand's legalisation of same-sex marriage. While David is now a staffer for the New Zealand Labour party, active attendance at rallies and Pride events remains crucial to his politics and identity. Regular involvement at these events is enabled through his residency in Wellington – a city oft presented as the centre of culture and constitutional progressiveness in New Zealand (Lonely Planet, 2015; New Zealand Tourism, 2015).

While David had not previously attended Mardi Gras, his affirming experience at San Francisco Pride alongside other Pride events, rendered impetus to travel to Sydney. As briefly previously noted, David was interesting in the way he chose to travel to Mardi Gras; contrasting with other participants, he preferred to travel alone, attending Mardi Gras Parade and the after party by himself and only meeting with friends for short periods while in Sydney. Further differing from other participants, David's travel was highly planned and structured, and centred on walking around Sydney visiting historically significant queer spaces and Mardi Gras events. Alone, David spent time dissecting encounters in particular ways that were entangled with his own politics and history. The combination of all these elements, David's ethnicity, urban residency, progressive Left wing politics, method of solo tourism, long personal investment in queer activism (as well as other unknown elements), rendered certain expectations around Mardi Gras and generated a certain lens in which David used to unpack dimensions of the event.

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *5.1 Emotional encounters: unpacking annoyance and joy*

Certain symbols of Pride are easier to commodify than others (Binnie, 2004). Many corporations across Sydney seek to capitalise on Mardi Gras through aligning themselves with the brand during the festival – particularly through the use of the rainbow flag – a materiality that easily aligns with dominant representations of Mardi Gras as respectable. Over time, through increasing circulation, the meanings layered on the flag in regards to Pride and support have intensified. Commodification plays an interesting role in the increasing circulation of the rainbow flag – both increasing the circulation of the flag and consequential effects, while simultaneously serving as threatening to its historical associations with Pride politics. The accumulative circulation of the rainbow flag may work to promote a certain queer culture as mainstream, rendering sameness rather than difference. Similarly, while the commodification of the rainbow flag increases the visibility of more mainstream queer cultures and politics, other forms of culture and political issues may become further marginalised through this process (Binnie, 2004; Binnie & Skeggs, 2004). While contested, the clearly identifiable rainbow flag stands as a meaningful symbol for many.

In this first section I contrast two differing encounters with the corporate commodification of Pride through the use of the rainbow flag. The first, a Coca-Cola billboard in Kings Cross, which reappropriated the rainbow flag during the 2015 Mardi Gras. The second, a rainbow banner by a cruise ship moored in Circular Quay, Sydney Harbour. Encountering Coca-Cola's appropriation of the rainbow flag, David reconfirmed dominant conceptions positioning Pride's commodification as negative:

This Kings Cross Coca-Cola mural really annoyed me [Figure 5.1]. I was walking to Kings Cross to look around. I was aware of the large Coca-Cola billboard they had near the intersection but I was not expecting that large rainbow billboard. Again I see a wilful and blatant misuse of what Pride and being queer is all about. I did actually glare at the billboards across the road for a little while, mildly raging. I don't think people fought so hard over the decades for their rights just so big companies cherry pick the rainbow flag for commercial purposes. I am of two minds – it's nice to see the company making the gesture, yet I know that the company is not doing this necessarily out of charity or generosity but rather to bolster its brand image by using others' imagery. I take several photos wanting to document this monstrosity.

Diary, Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2014



Figure 5.1: Coca-Cola rainbow billboard. *Source:* David.

Curious in trying to make sense of David's encounter with the Coca-Cola sign, I asked for further explanation when we met again for the follow up interview:

For me, because identity is so connected to that symbol of the rainbow flag I feel that when it's used, not flippantly, but out of context it's just a bit weird....So that probably explains why I objected to it being used in places that you wouldn't expect. But often I have found, and I think it's a good thing, members of the queer community often, it seems to be a much more diverse set of interests and views...and perspectives on the world, which is quite valuable...and quite different to the mainstream.... that's what the rainbow flag symbolises to me...and that's why it disturbs me a little bit when I see the rainbow flag appropriated for other purposes. When those purposes it's probably quite conformist or establishment in that way because generally people use, and I've seen the rainbow used as a queer statement and an assertion of something, not just fitting in.

Ahmed's (2004) distinction between 'likeness' and 'unlikeness' assists in unpacking this encounter. Annoyance surfaces through this encounter due to David's queer activist history and intense political investment in Pride. David's personal political history, as entangled with a particular affective economy of Pride circulated through the rainbow flag, evokes negative emotions; named as annoyance. This is because its use by Coca-Cola is read as 'unlike' the meanings David himself layers over the symbol. The incorporation of the rainbow into the Coca-Cola brand is felt as an aggressive disruption because it attempts to reposition Pride as conformist, establishment, fun and light hearted, rewriting David's version of Pride and queer history as positioned against the mainstream. The threat of the Coca-Cola rainbow mural operates to distance David from the brand; reinforcing boundaries

between commodification and Pride. At the same time, annoyance directed towards Coca-Cola brings into existence, and intensifies, love for that which is threatened, queer Pride.

The responses David experienced in encountering the use of the rainbow flag on a cruise ship docked at Circular Quay contrasted with those of anger triggered by the commodification of Pride by Coca-Cola in Kings Cross. As David explains:

I was really surprised and laughed out loud when I saw the very large banner draped on the cruise ship by the Rocks [Figure 5.2]. I thought it was an unexpected but positive surprise.

Diary, Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> March, 2014



Figure 5.2: Mardi Gras banner on cruise ship. *Source:* David.

From this narrative we can begin to ascertain that for David the use of the rainbow flag becomes problematic when there is no longer an explicit connection, or ‘likeness’, to his own version of Pride, when it is ‘appropriated for other purposes’, that are ‘conformist or establishment’ – such as, exclusively attempting to attract customers, as is read by David in encountering the Coca-Cola sign. In the absence of a ‘likeness’ felt between Coca-Cola and Pride, a dis-identification or ‘unlikeness’, along with annoyance emerges. In contrast, David’s surprised reaction to laugh out loud (joy) when encountering the cruise ship banner at Circular Quay suggests an immediate likeness was felt that somehow went beyond, or in some way complimented, the commodified dimensions of the banner.

There are a number of material, cultural and spatial distinctions that may be drawn between these two versions of commodification, which work to further understand the ways David identified their ‘likeness’ and ‘unlikeness’ towards Pride. First, Coca-Cola’s use of the rainbow flag in this instance is

clearly aligned with the Coca-Cola brand – through the image of the Coke bottle, the hashtag ‘openhappiness’ (which is a notable brand slogan), appropriation of the infamous ‘white swirl’ (employed in brand logos since 1969) and the positioning of the rainbow side by side with the infamous Coca-Cola billboard. All of which contrast to the absence of branding on the cruise ship banner. Moreover, existing awareness of the Coca-Cola billboard, alongside its positioning within one of Sydney’s major commercial centres, Kings Cross, renders an encounter already embedded within capitalism.

Interestingly, however, the Coca-Cola billboard has historically served as a symbolic cultural icon for the Kings Cross district; a long standing, notorious ‘red light’ district, in inner Sydney (Sayer & Nowra, 2000). The billboard, therefore, often stands as a beacon for an alternative, subversive culture often aligned with this suburb – despite, paradoxically, being an advertisement for a multinational corporate brand. Considering David states his cultural awareness of the Coca-Cola billboard, it is interesting this does not appear to influence his reading of the rainbow billboard as mainstream in this encounter.

The cruise ship banner, conversely, presents no identifiable branding or attempt to generate something that goes beyond the banner. Its effects may therefore be read as a humbler, and consequentially less threatening, attempt to align with Mardi Gras. Intersections between place and surprise are also crucial. The placing of the rainbow banner on a cruise ship moored at Circular Quay is surprising because it disrupts assumptions of Circular Quay as a heavily governed tourist centre. Cruise ship companies are also entangled with narratives of Mardi Gras, and lesbian and gay tourism, with many offering cruises specifically designed for Mardi Gras attendees, which dock in Sydney Harbour during the festival (Mardi Gras, 2015). Atlantis Cruises, for instance, praises itself for being ‘the world’s largest gay and lesbian speciality holiday company’, and has offered holiday packages ‘tailored specifically to gay and lesbian guests’ for twenty two years (Mardi Gras, 2015). While these cruises are commercial, they are designed to serve a particular queer culture; a likeness aligning with David’s own understandings of Mardi Gras and Pride.

### *5.2 The emotional dimensions of representation*

Both the representative and material corporeality of gendered, sexualised and raced bodies are central to the construction of Mardi Gras as a celebration of diversity. As such, Mardi Gras’ privileging of white, European faces in constructing a marketable, respectable queer sexuality within the pages of the official programme evoked heightened responses for David, which strongly contrasted with the pleasure derived from the diverse material ontology of the parade:

I was really pleased to see the huge diversity of people, teams and floats in the parade. There were lots of different ethnicities, interests and sexual identities represented, which was

fantastic. This was in contrast with one Mardi Gras publication (it was the official programme – the large one with the white face with coloured triangles on it). It irritated me a lot as I read through it. While the theme and language about Mardi Gras is all about ‘diversity’ – the programme itself had very little ethnic diversity in it. I got to the root of my irritation and counted the faces in the programme content and ads, and out of 117 only 5 had non-European faces. That’s beyond a joke. I realise a lot of work goes into publications like this but I wish they would give some more thought as to what subliminal messages their choices may convey.

Diary, Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> March, 2014

Seeking to learn more about this encounter, I asked David to further reflect in the follow up interview:

Yeah...I think that was definitely one jarring thing. That’s why I wanted to include it, it just irritated me. Because when I first read it...started reading it, I just got increasingly irritated

Pausing:

...and then I realised why...I guess it’s more of that awareness, or that notion that it’s one thing to talk, and use the words of diversity, but are the things we do, do they actually include or encourage that diversity? I guess that’s part of where I was coming from and that’s why I was really pleasantly surprised and really pleased to see there was real diversity in the parade. I think especially the first five or six floats, because there was deliberately Aboriginal Australians, there’s transgender, intersex. They were amongst the first few floats. And I think that was a really good message to have....that was for me political.

Interview, March 2014

Identifying as both Asian and queer, David dis-identifies with both the dominance of white faces and diversity discourses encountered in the official program. David understands the normative affects in the misalignment between marketing and material reality, where marginalised subjectivities (such as the intersection of Asian and queer) become further silenced through the production of a homogenised ‘diversity’ (Fincher, 2015) – ‘I realise a lot of work goes into publications like this but...’. Irritation arises through this misalignment, where the program represents a threat to his own version of Pride and is thus, following Ahmed (2004) read as unlikeness.

Disconnects between Mardi Gras’ official program and the parade can be interpreted in terms of Mardi Gras’ temporal and spatial regulation enforced by organisers. During the parade a regulated representation of sexuality is allowed, yet controlled, within specifically designated times and spaces to ensure just the right mix of spectacle, sexuality, politics and hedonism is achieved. The spatial and temporal epicentre of the festival – the beginning of the parade – is a crucial moment where more

risqué forms of diversity are enabled by organisers without serving as a broader threat to normative boundaries and limits (Waite & Markwell, 2006). In contrast, representations of diversity that do threaten spatial and temporal boundaries, such as the internationally distributed official program, delivers a watered down, entertaining and respectable version of ‘diversity’ that serves as easily digestible and non-threatening to wider audiences in the lead up to the event. The aim of the official printed program, as stated on the event’s website, being to ‘maximise publicity’ and generate profit for the month long festival (Mardi Gras, 2014), rather than represent and cater to the queer community. As part of the broadly marketed official programme ‘diversity’ discourses and materialities are packaged to form as showpieces (Fincher et al., 2014). What results, however, is a normative homogenisation of sexual diversity, which is equated with white bodies, obscuring the realities of the event and serving to isolate those who do not identify with such constructions.

### *5.3 Governance, scale and the spatial politics of belonging*

Governments across the Global North increasingly recognise the potential in using public structures to assist in aligning the state with events celebrating sexual diversity. Impetus stems from a number of directions, including motives to capitalise on visitor spending power, by selling and branding the city momentarily as ‘queer’, as well as motivation to welcome those seeking to celebrate sexual diversity (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004). For instance, during San Francisco’s 2013 and 2014 Pride Week, City Hall was illuminated in rainbow lighting for the event’s entirety. Likewise, Auckland City lit up four iconic locations (the Sky Tower, War Memorial, the gantry at Silo Park and The Cloud), and flew rainbow flags from a number of government structures across the city for one week in conjunction with the 2014 Auckland Pride Festival. In 2010, the City of Sydney established an annual tradition to raise the rainbow flag to mark the beginning of Mardi Gras, and fly it for the duration of the festival; an act that served to symbolically extend belonging from the municipal authority to Mardi Gras attendees during the festival. David spoke of the joy in encountering the rainbow flag on Sydney Town Hall:

I was really pleased and happy to see the rainbow flag flying off the Sydney Town Hall for Mardi Gras [Figure 5.3]. I had briefly read about the [Town Hall rainbow] flag before I got here and to see it was quite heartening. From my view it follows seeing a series of rainbow flags flying off Aotea Centre, which is a major arts and entertainment centre opposite the Town Hall in Auckland for our Pride festival [one week earlier]. The Sydney flag is not quite as big as the flag they fly in the Castro [San Francisco], but still it’s a great sight and symbol. I thought it was quite lovely in the sun and waving in the wind. I am happy to see it here. I take several photos to try and get the flag waving in the right position as I wait for the friend I had arranged to meet in the late afternoon before going to dinner. I am personally more favourable towards the rainbow flag being associated with public or governmental places,



because there is the more logical notion of democracy and its promise of fairness, equality, and inclusivity that one usually tends to (or hopes to) associate with civil and political institutions.

Diary, Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> February, 2014



Figure 5.3: Rainbow flag flown from Sydney Town Hall during Mardi Gras. *Source:* David.

Recognising David's historical entanglements with governmental queer politics, Pride is read as a likeness in this encounter because of the Town Hall's positioning as the material centre of governance for the City of Sydney. Where, for David, associations between Pride and governance are powerful because of the broader obligations civil and political institutions possess in creating a fair and inclusive democracy for citizens. The intersection of Town Hall and rainbow flag is thus felt as a powerful form of inclusion, as the affective economy of Pride becomes wrapped up in the affective economy of Sydney City. Crucially the affective intensity of this encounter is heightened by similar moments experienced by David in Auckland and San Francisco. At the same time the affective intensity between Pride and City of Sydney is dulled because the flag's size does not quite compare to what is flown in the Castro, San Francisco (a place arguably representing the centre of Western, middle class, progressive queer politics (Knopp & Brown, 2003; Valentine, 2001)). This comparison highlights how the politics of festivals are entwined with embodied histories beyond the spatial and temporal frame of the event.

Similarly examining the use of the rainbow flag, Gorman-Murray et al. (2008) highlighted the ways belonging takes place differently across a number of scales within Australia. Internationally, Australia is often viewed as a tolerant, liberal society, illustrated through the visibility and size of events, such as Mardi Gras Parade. At the scale of the nation, however, conservative politics govern; evident through the current same-sex marriage debate, where despite recent moves to legalise same-sex marriage across the Global North, some influential Australian Liberal Party politicians continue to view this legislation as a threat to the institution of heterosexual coupledness, and Australian family values (Grattan, 2013). Meanwhile, the scale of City of Sydney, again represents a progressive, Left wing politics, that actively works to be inclusive of non-normative sexualities. City of Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore, by way of example, was the first Councillor to publicly support Mardi Gras in the 1980s, and the first Member of the Legislative Assembly to march in the parade, in 1992. Moore is also a public campaigner for the legalisation of same-sex marriage (Moore, 2012). Given Sydney Town Hall represents the material epicentre of governance for the City of Sydney, this site works at the scale of Sydney City. Flying the rainbow flag from the Town Hall thus welcomes, and extends belonging, to Mardi Gras attendees at this scale.

Encounters with government authority uses of the rainbow flag, however, were not always celebratory. Feelings of disappointment emerged when governmental uses of Pride were felt to be ‘out of place’ or misaligned. For instance, the dynamics of pride and disappointment, and the ways they circulated within the affective economy of Pride is evident in David’s reaction upon encountering a City of Sydney Mardi Gras banner on the Harbour Bridge during the morning of the parade:

It surprised me to see a small banner on the Harbour Bridge [Figure 5.4]. I was surprised, firstly to see it in the first place, secondly that it was so small compared to what they could have done perhaps, and thirdly that it was only obvious on the day of the parade. I was disappointed by how small it was. I think if they [City of Sydney - the government organisation involved with managing the Harbour Bridge (City of Sydney, 2015)] were going to do something on the Harbour Bridge in terms of Mardi Gras it would have made sense to do something bigger and a bit bolder.

Diary, Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> March, 2014



Figure 5.4: City of Sydney Mardi Gras banner on Sydney Harbour Bridge. *Source:* David.

Public spaces are embedded with meanings (Leib & Webster, 2004). The Sydney Harbour Bridge is part of Australia's national consciousness; often used as a space to circulate and strengthen images considered uniquely 'Australian'. Arguably the Sydney Harbour Bridge is bound up with the affective economy of Australian national belonging and in consequence, governmental decisions regarding how, where, and when to utilise the bridge as a space to represent national belonging are political (Gorman-Murray et al., 2008; Leib & Webster, 2004). A bold and highly visible display of Pride potentially acts as a way to open up the affective economy of national belonging, extending feelings of inclusion to Mardi Gras attendees. Yet, in this instance belonging is only extended so far within this iconic Australian space – serving, for David, to reinstate the celebration of sexual diversity as remaining contained within the confines of designated Mardi Gras spaces – within Sydney.

Recognising the politics at work here David welcomes the banner, yet because of its inhibited visibility, simultaneously reads this display as 'tokenistic' and exclusionary.

Disappointment, rather than pride, emerges from this encounter through the unexpected components on display – a single lonely banner exists, hanging from one column of the highly visible Harbour Bridge; its size, temporality and number contrast to the size and iconic status of the bridge, rendering a sense of tokenism. David's disappointment is directed towards the City of Sydney local government authority, at their missed opportunity, for not being daring enough to do something bigger and bolder and initial surprise as to why they bothered at all with this spatially and temporally contained banner. Disappointment is again productive here in identifying the effects of governmental attempts to appropriate queer symbols for their own purposes.

City of Sydney's decision making process around the hanging of the banner is unknown. Limited budgets, time, competing priorities and so on may have come into play. A more pessimistic reading of this display, evoked and emergent through David's encounter, emerges through contrasting the Mardi Gras banner to alternative uses of the bridge for events historically entangled with Australia's national identity, such as during major male football tournaments and Australian New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) day (Figure 5.5 & 5.6). During such events the entirety of the bridge is often utilised as a canvass to circulate national honour; extending belonging to the Australian nation. On this view, contrasts between bridge and banner serve to reinforce power differentials between government and Mardi Gras attendee.



Figure 5.5: National Rugby League sporting installation on Sydney Harbour Bridge. *Source:* Attila (2012).





Figure 5.6: ANZAC installation on Sydney Harbour Bridge. *Source:* News.com.au (2015).

## 6. CONCLUSION

Debates complicating the universal constructions of tourist commodification are far from new (see, for example, Cole 2007; Connell & Gibson 2002; Wang 1999). Yet, distinctions continue to resurface within tourist studies scholarship that work to reify boundaries positioning processes of commodification as necessarily liberating, victimising *or* pathologising (see, for example, Godfrey & Wearing, 2012; Reis, 2012; Spracklen & Spracklen, 2013). There is potential through these processes of academic boundary making, that the meanings, politics and memories of individuals invested in these performances become devalued and disdained as tourist scholars praise the notion of ‘pre-

commodified' experience. Moreover, despite the passing of two decades since Veijola and Jokinen's (1994) call to recognise the forgotten body, emotion, affect and the encounter remain on the margins in considerations of tourism's commodification; an area of tourist studies driven by Modernist, rationalist agendas. This is despite increasing understandings that we need to know how individuals encounter, receive and respond to processes of tourism commodification (Robinson, 2012).

To that end, this paper illustrated how attention to embodied encounters can assist scholars to unpack and understand commodification in tourist spaces. It was shown how emotions are political and cultural, bound up in understandings of space, scale and situated knowledge. A case was thus made for attending to the encounter as a way to understand the complex ways commodification is experienced and understood in varying touristic contexts. It was argued that attending to the encounter therefore presents opportunity to trouble universal constructions and pre-existing expectations of commodification, and actually understand the effects for those who find meaning in various events, symbols and places. Further, recognising the emotional affects certain forms of commodification undertake not only points to the complexity of commodification itself, but also suggests ways through which event organisers and government communications officers may negotiate sponsorship and promotion requirements during event planning – so as to recognise, acknowledge and negotiate the effects of particular decision processes.

Some potential ways in which to take the intersections between tourism, commodification and the encounter forward, are to consider a greater number of attendee encounters with commodification. Such research would further illustrate the multiple ways commodification may be encountered, yet also point to emerging themes that may assist in negotiating the commodification of events (to the extent that this is possible). At the same time, however, while not wishing to prescribe an essentialized method - in-depth attention to the experiences of a small number of participants (while somewhat unorthodox within tourist studies) provides a space for individuals to 'speak', that cannot be reduced to either broader cultural structures, normative valuing systems or individual agency alone.

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